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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 001426

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [FR](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [PHUM](#)  
SUBJECT: FRENCH MFA RECEIVES DEMARCHE ON DEALING WITH  
SYRIA, PROVIDES INFORMATION ON SYRIAN DEPUTY PM DARDARI,S  
JULY 21-22 VISIT TO PARIS

REF: SECSTATE 78880

Classified By: PolMC Kathleen Allegrone for reasons 1.4 (B & D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On July 23 Poloffs delivered reftel points to French MFA Syria desk officer Jean-Christophe Auge and European Affairs officer Anne Predour. Auge said a Sarkozy visit to Damascus was highly likely but subject to a last-minute cancellation depending on events in Lebanon and whether Syria acts in good faith on normalizing relations between Beirut and Damascus. FM Kouchner would most likely advance the Sarkozy visit after August 19, but the trip was still subject to scheduling constraints. Auge said the GOF was extremely concerned with the human rights situation in Syria, including the arrest of a Damascus Declaration National Council member immediately after a recent visit from Elysee secretary general Claude Gueant and diplomatic adviser Jean David Levitte. He claimed the Syrians were listening to French concerns and not rejecting them out of hand as they had done in the past. With respect to the July 21-22 Paris visit of Syria's Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Dardari, Predour reported that French officials reiterated the GOF's tough line on its expectations in Lebanon. Dardari's main interest in visiting France was to discuss economic issues related to Sarkozy's upcoming visit to Syria and to solicit increased French engagement in economic reform efforts. The EU had yet to decide how it wanted to proceed in terms of the draft association agreement, but that such a decision would follow Sarkozy's visit and be taken pursuant to his recommendation in his capacity as current EU Council president, she said. END SUMMARY.

Sarkozy and Kouchner Damascus visits: Dates not firm

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¶2. (C) We delivered reftel points July 23 to French MFA Syria desk officer Jean-Christophe Auge. In the absence of more senior interlocutors until mid-August due to vacation, we agreed in principle to organize a meeting with Auge's boss, DAS-equivalent Ludovic Pouille o/a August 19. We asked Auge whether this would occur before or after French Foreign Minister Kouchner's expected visit to Damascus in late August to prepare for French President Sarkozy's visit in early to mid September. Auge responded that Kouchner had not yet decided on a firm date for his visit, but it would likely fall after August 19. He noted scheduling constraints like the annual conference of French ambassadors in Paris that will begin August 26 or 27. There was a possibility Kouchner might wait until after that conference, but it would almost defeat the purpose of his going to advance Sarkozy's visit if there is only a few days interval. When we asked whether the date of 8 September for a Sarkozy visit we had seen in an MFA list of official visits was final, Auge initially demurred but later said that a September 7-8 timeframe was entirely possible. He also acknowledged that the French Presidency -- and the MFA -- saw the Sarkozy visit to Damascus as highly likely but subject to a last-minute cancellation depending on events in Lebanon and whether Syria acts in good faith on

normalizing relations between Beirut and Damascus.

GOF concerns about human rights abuses and Lebanon

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13. (C) Auge, who had read through the points we had prepared as a non-paper, declined to offer a detailed, substantive response. He did, however, described it as "comprehensive" in the English sense of being complete but not necessarily "comprehensive" in the French sense of suggesting an understanding of what lies behind the Syrian positions on the issues raised. Auge said that France was extremely concerned with the human rights situation, including the clumsy coincidence of the arrest immediately after Elysee secretary general Claude Gueant and diplomatic adviser Jean David Levitte recently visited Damascus. He further claimed that the Syrians were listening to French concerns and not rejecting them out of hand as they had done in the past.

14. (C) With respect to the July 21-22 visit of Syria's Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs ((Abdallah)) Dardari, Auge and his colleague from one of the MFA's European affairs offices, Anne Predour, reported that State Secretary for Europe ((Alain)) Jouyet had reiterated the GOF's tough line on its expectations in Lebanon. According to Auge, Jouyet was the only MFA official to meet with Dardari. He called Jouyet a good choice because Jouyet had presided over a French/Lebanese organization before his current position and has a reputation as a hardliner in terms of Syria's presumed involvement in political violence in Lebanon, including the assassination of former PM Rafiq

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EU association agreement pending outcome of Sarkozy visit

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15. (C) Auge confirmed that Dardai's main interest in visiting France was to discuss economic issues related to Sarkozy's upcoming visit to Syria but also to solicit increased French engagement in economic reform efforts Dardari is pursuing. Predour said that the EU had yet to decide, probably among foreign ministers, how it wanted to proceed in terms of the draft association agreement. The principal options were to proceed with ratification on the basis of the draft initialed in 2004 or to reopen negotiations to take into account the two additional EU members since agreement was reached on the current draft. Based on what Predour and Auge said, we had the impression that such a decision would follow Sarkozy's visit to Damascus and be taken pursuant to his recommendation in his capacity as current EU Council president.

16. (C) Dardari had a separate meeting with Finance Minister Christine Lagarde. Auge stated that a large part of the meeting was devoted to discussing respective challenges of economic reform in the two countries. Dardari asked for help to promote transparency, combat corruption (which Dardari supposedly admitted was a major brake on Syrian economic development), and train Syrian officials. The Lagarde meeting did not, according to Auge, focus on commercial contracts the Syrians want to pursue with French firms. That was handled in separate meetings with the companies concerned and the major French employers organization.

17. (U) Additionally, Le Figaro newspaper reported on July 24 that warming relations between Paris and Damascus could lead to some added benefits for French private industry, especially in the petroleum sector. French petrol giant Total is in joint-venture talks with state-owned Syrian Petroleum Company that would permit Total to operate in Syria, which is a dramatic change of events from relations between the two countries during the Chirac administration.

Damascus is also counting on Total to modernize oil fields in east Syria, as well as to construct more refineries in conjunction with Qatar Petroleum Company. All of this, however, depends on Sarkozy,s signature of the agreement on his future visit to Damascus. Representatives from the French Agency for Development (AFD) intend to visit Syria in August, while French employer,s union MEDEF (Mouvement des Entreprises de France) staff intend to visit Syria in December.

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